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Sound, Music and Violence

Introduction. Sound, Music and Violence

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Luis Velasco-Pufleau



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Introduction. Sound, Music and Violence

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Luis Velasco-Pufleau

- 1 When, in the third *canto* of the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil leads Dante through the gates of Hell, Dante is frightened not by what he sees, but by what he hears: “Sighs, weeping, loud wailing resounded through the starless air”.¹ The horror is such that Dante sheds tears. The lamentations of the tortured in “strange languages” and “horrible tongues”, the “words of pain” and “accents of anger”, make a deafening tumult. Faced with the incomprehension of these sounds of fear and pain, Dante asks Virgil, “Master, what is this I hear?”² He feels the pain of the sounds but does not know who makes them or why; he has never heard such sounds before. To be able to attach a meaning to this new world of sound, he must now listen attentively, because listening will be essential in order to know the space, to understand situations and to give meaning to his advancement into the different circles of Hell. This until the last verses, when Dante and his guide find their way out of the lower world through listening: they recognise the hidden path by which they will come out “not by sight, but by the sound of a little stream”³ which erodes the rock. By following this path, they return to the bright world and can finally “look again at the stars”.⁴
- 2 Dante’s account of his journey through Hell illustrates the emotional complexity of sound phenomena and shows how listening can become a tool for exploration of, engagement with and sensorial knowledge of the world. This special issue of *Transposition* explores these subjects through an analysis of the links between sound, music and violence. Six years after the fourth issue was devoted to “Music and Armed Conflicts after 1945”,⁵ this special issue intends to contribute to the considerable growth of interdisciplinary research aimed at understanding collective violence and war through sound and music. In the fields of musicology, ethnomusicology, history, anthropology and sound studies, numerous works have focused as much on the repertoires mobilised in wartime as on the listening experiences of female combatants and civilians in conflict or post-conflict contexts. Svanibor Pettan’s pioneering work on

the Balkan wars⁶ was followed by research on the links between music and violence,⁷ on the sound and musical practices of soldiers during or after the US invasion of Iraq,⁸ as well as a renewed interest in the two World Wars⁹ and the armed conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁰ These works constitute different entries in an “acoustemology of violence”.¹¹ In all cases, the topics and methods are as diverse as the many researchers involved.

- 3 This vast scientific project is above all a collective one and is based on dialogues between researchers working in different countries who mobilise concepts and methodologies belonging to various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. This issue of *Transposition* is published in the context of a large social movement which reflects many concerns about neo-liberal reforms in higher education and research in France. To counter the cult of performance, the myth of individual success and the obligation of competition, it is important to insist on the collective dimension of knowledge production. We are treading paths paved by others before us. Our ideas, no matter how original they may seem, are always part of larger constellations and are indebted to the legacy of those who have gone before us and with whom we have developed them. As sociologist Gary Younge recently observed in *The Guardian*, “Only the privileged and the naive believe people’s achievements are purely the product of their own genius”.¹²
- 4 This issue is collective in many ways. The three articles in the first part come from the international workshop Sound and Music in War from the Middle Ages to the Present, which I had the opportunity to organise with Marion Uhlig and Martin Rohde at the Institute for Medieval Studies of the University of Fribourg on 12 and 13 November 2018.¹³ The second part of the issue consists of an interview and three critical commentaries that respond to and extend the statements made. Finally, the third part is comprised of eight essays that comment on certain texts in the issue or develop theoretical, ethical and methodological questions raised by research on music, sound and war. These texts answer two questions: how can the study of sound and music help us to understand collective violence and war? How can the study of war and collective violence help us to understand the importance of musical practices and listening for human beings?¹⁴
- 5 However, associating music with the violence, destruction and atrocities of war is not evident in research in humanities and social sciences. As ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice notes, research in the field of what he calls “ethnomusicology in times (and places) of trouble” was scarce before the early 2000s.¹⁵ This is explained, among other things, by cultural imagination in which music is necessarily associated with “good” things, and by scientific assumptions that music can only be produced in stable social settings.¹⁶ The texts in this issue contribute to the reconfiguration of these beliefs and, as Morag J. Grant suggests in her essay, to the exploration of the cultural foundations of war and collective violence.

Listening to experiences of armed violence

- 6 The sound narrative of Dante’s *Inferno* evoked at the beginning of this introduction reminds us that sound can be an event that permanently alters a listener’s perception of the world around him. The cries and complaints that resonate in the dark air of Hell terrify Dante, while at the same time making him understand that he is entering an

unknown place. However, sound can also be a process that lasts over time and, through sensory interactions with the listener, transforms their perception of reality.

- 7 Dante learns to listen and to evolve in this new world of sound and, through this process, develops new knowledge about how it works and the power dynamics at play. Violence and war shift the limits and thresholds of the usual soundscapes, permanently transforming the listeners' acoustic landmarks and capacities.¹⁷ The development of these listening habits and skills constitutes a new "auditory regime": the set of techniques, technologies, regulations and shared knowledge that give shape to the listening practices of a given community.¹⁸
- 8 Is it possible to better understand the experience of war through auditory regimes? Recent research has explored this question, particularly through the testimonies of combatants.¹⁹ Michael Guida's essay in this issue highlights a little-examined facet of these narratives: nature's sonic experience by British soldiers mobilised on the Western Front during the First World War. Through the analysis of various sources—diaries, poems and letters—Guida shows how soldiers attach particular importance to bird songs, which frame their listening experiences of trench soundscapes.²⁰ In his essay, John Morgan O'Connell discusses the ideas developed by several of the issue's authors, putting them into perspective with his own research on the Battle of Gallipoli (1915–1916). He explores the links between music and memory, particularly when music is used to both remember and forget, to celebrate victory or to commemorate defeat.²¹
- 9 The analysis of listening experiences and auditory regimes also made it possible to study non-combatants' experience of armed violence.²² This field of research is explored by Nikita Hock in his article on the listening experiences of Warsaw and East Galician Jews in underground shelters during World War II. Through a large body of diaries, Hock succeeds in studying the experiences of civilians—especially women and the elderly—who endured violence and persecution during the Holocaust.²³

Listening to the sonic remnants of violence

- 10 The question of access to sources and their analysis is central to an acoustemology of violence. How to interpret the sonic traces of war in written sources? As Annegret Fauser points out in her essay, these archives constitute mediations of sound experiences from the past, ways of listening and narrating. Drawing on the work of Ana María Ochoa Gautier, she suggests following "an acoustically tuned exploration of the written archive"²⁴ in order to explore the sonic remnants of violence, while questioning archives as historically constructed entities, thus privileging the voices of certain types of witnesses.²⁵
- 11 Because violence "is always an attack upon a person's dignity, sense of selfhood, and future",²⁶ it upsets and reconfigures the boundaries between sound, noise and silence, between what is sayable and what is not. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier states, "One of the characteristics of violence is the redefinition of acoustic space".²⁷ Anna Papaeti explores the modalities and issues for (ethno)musicological research of this redefinition in the context of the use of music for torture. In her essay, she reflects on the consequences of the trauma inflicted by sound and music in detention contexts and on the inherent ethical dimension of witnessing testimonies of victims.²⁸ The modalities of what the voice can express, and the boundaries between sound, noise and silence,

are some of the issues examined by Sarah Kay in her article on the *sirventes* composed by Bertran de Born, one of the most famous troubadours of the second half of the twelfth century, who is also featured in Dante's *Inferno*. Mobilising the Lacanian concept of "extimacy", Kay is interested in the sonic dimension of these political songs of love and war that reveal a mediation between noise and music, and reconfigure the poetic transmission of the subjects of love and death.²⁹

- 12 In his contribution, Martin Daughtry calls for a break with an anthropocentric vision of musical activity; he questions the practical and theoretical frameworks that contribute to fuelling one of the motors of modern violence: the human / nature dualism.³⁰ To have separated beings that should have remained together is precisely the reproach that Dante makes to the troubadour Bertran de Born when his spectre appears in the eighth circle of Hell: "His severed head he was holding up by the hair, dangling it from his hand like a lantern";³¹ divided for sowing discord, his punishment is to proceed with his brain separated from his body. Reflecting on the links between music and violence gives Daughtry the opportunity to think beyond human exceptionalism and to call for a different kind of listening to the sonic remnants of human violence.
- 13 Listening to these remnants can raise important ethical questions when researchers are required to talk and work with people who actively participated in the atrocities of war. Although a fundamental topic, explicit examination of it remains largely absent in research on the links between sound, music and violence. Hettie Malcomson discusses this issue, stating the need to respect the humanity and subjectivity of those involved, while avoiding any kind of sensationalism in the process of academic knowledge production.³²

Violence and the agency of sound and music

- 14 All the texts in this issue share a scientific position that is worth recalling: sound and music are not examined as the *cause* of violent action, but rather as *symbolic resources* that actors can mobilise in processes or dynamics of violence. The difference is significant and involves the rejection of an ontology of sound and music in which human will is dominated by their supposed powers. Rather, it is a question of understanding how people use music and sound phenomena to give meaning to their reality in contexts of war or to justify acts of destruction and violence.
- 15 Music can be a device for projecting, framing and preparing for confrontation with the enemy. The narratives it conveys as well as its sound characteristics can be mobilised by the actors in order to engage in a real or imaginary confrontation. This hypothesis is explored by Victor A. Stoichita in his article on the listening experiences of American soldiers and the Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik. He shows how the possibility that sound and music are at the origin of a causal chain—the ability that the listener gives sounds, to "transform" the world in which they live—is closely linked to the ontology of the listening experience.³³ Cornelia Nuxoll explores other issues of musical agency in her essay on her fieldwork in Sierra Leone with former fighters of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Her observations point to the emotional complexity of music used in the dynamics of violence as well as in disarmament processes.³⁴
- 16 The interview I conducted with Jean-Marc Rouillan, a founding member of the armed revolutionary group *Action directe* (1977–1987), presents the point of view of a protagonist of a kind of political violence. In it he tells how his political engagement

around 1968 was preceded by a musical engagement, in anticipation of a more direct confrontation with the state. Listening to rock and punk music served as a catalyst for bringing together demands for freedom and autonomous political action.³⁵ The interview is followed by three critical commentaries by Matthew Worley (University of Reading),³⁶ Timothy Scott Brown (Northeastern University)³⁷ and Jeremy Varon (New School).³⁸ These texts deepen, criticise or contextualise positions or facts presented by Jean-Marc Rouillan. Whether it is the relationship between music and the collective memory of political struggles, the autonomy sought by the punk movement or the link between rock and capitalism, the commentaries provide valuable counterpoints in grasping the complexity of the historical situation evoked.

- 17 As Morag J. Grant asserts, “Long after ceasefire, music continues to play an oftentimes fundamental role in celebrating or commemorating wars and warriors, thus functioning as a fundamental toolkit for collective memory which itself, all too often, becomes mobilised in the service of wars yet to come”.³⁹ By exploring the links between sound, music and violence, this special issue of *Transposition* questions the ways in which human societies see themselves, build their collective memory and envisage their futures.

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ABSTRACTS

Listening can become a tool for exploration of, engagement with and sensorial knowledge of the world. Music can be a device for projecting, framing and preparing for confrontation with the enemy. How can the study of sound and music help us to understand collective violence and war? How can the study of war and collective violence help us to understand the importance of musical practices and listening for human beings? This special issue of *Transposition* explores these questions through an analysis of the links between sound, music and violence.

L'écoute peut devenir un outil d'exploration, d'engagement et de connaissance sensible du monde. La musique peut être un moyen de projeter, d'encadrer et de préparer l'affrontement avec l'ennemi. De quelle façon l'étude du son et de la musique peut-elle aider à comprendre la violence collective et la guerre ? Comment l'étude de la guerre et de la violence collective peut-

elle aider à comprendre l'importance des pratiques musicales et de l'écoute pour les êtres humains ? Ce numéro hors-série de *Transposition* propose d'explorer ces questions à partir de l'analyse des liens entre son, musique et violence.

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Keywords: agency, auditory regime, Dante, listening, music, sound, violence, war

Mots-clés: agentivité, Dante, écoute, guerre, musique, régime d'audition, son, violence

AUTHOR

LUIS VELASCO-PUFLEAU

Luis Velasco-Pufleau is a musicologist and sound artist. He is currently a SNSF researcher at the University of Bern (Walter Benjamin Kolleg / Institute of Musicology). His work critically reflects on the relationship between music and politics in contemporary societies. As a researcher and sound artist, he is interested in exploring innovative forms of writing at the crossroads of artistic creation and research in the humanities and social sciences.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1330-974X>